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ABSTRACT

Colleges across the nation have long been investigating the need for an oral communication component in the graduation requirements. Hence the question: should communication departments in colleges and universities advocate "speaking across the curriculum?" If the objective of education is to graduate people who can discover information and share that information with others, then, of course, it makes sense to teach them the aspects of oral communication and require that they apply this in all courses, not just in the communication department. Capstone courses or other courses taught by professors in more than one discipline would be one means of integrating communication into the larger college curriculum. Such a course is offered at the 10 Maricopa Community Colleges in Arizona. The advantages of a speaking across the curriculum program is that it increases the number of opportunities students have for practicing their oral skills. However, there are disadvantages to such an approach. First, professors in some disciplines, the sciences for instance, do not have the time to work oral communication into their courses. Second, some professors simply do not have the skills to teach oral communication, having never taken so much as one speech class in their careers. Third, speech practice in every class could be redundant. Fourth, "speaking across the curriculum" opens the door to a line of thinking that assumes anyone can teach communication and therefore raises questions about whether a basic communication course needs to be taught at all. (TB)

Building Community:
Communication Principles and Practices Across the Curriculum

Building Community:
Integrating Communication Curriculum Between Courses In Other Disciplines
or
"Speaking Across the Curriculum"

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Colleges across the nation have long been investigating the need for an oral communication component in the graduation requirements. Grants have been offered to conduct feasibility studies, programs have been crafted to implement this new idea, and workshops have been offered to teach the elements of oral presentations to teachers. Despite these efforts, it is ironic that some colleges and universities still graduate potential professors/teachers who have had no formal courses in oral communication. A recent study of 1,000 secondary-school principals across the United States revealed that "communication-related skills, factors, and courses were rated highest in importance by principals as they assess candidates for teaching positions" (Johnson p. 1). Yet classroom educators can graduate from the four major universities in Arizona and many other states and not have taken a single "speech" class in order to receive their degree.

My concern for "oral communication across the curriculum" began in 1958 when I taught my first classes in a small high school in northwest Iowa. In that small high school numbering about fifty students, I was the English and Speech Communication Department. After several attempts to hold a discussion in the freshman and sophomore English classes, I realized that the students were afraid to answer, to ask questions or to speak up in class because they did not know how to choose the precise words to use in order to share the precise meaning they had in mind. They also seemed to lack a sense of organization. Since I was also teaching

the only junior class speech course in this small high school and the senior class seemed to have no fear of sharing ideas, I decided that all my students would have opportunities to speak in every course that I taught. The freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior English students each presented oral book reports, gave instructional or informative speeches on certain aspects of the literature we were reading, and researched and gave five minute presentations about historical information that related to the literature. They also shared their research papers (often persuasive) with the rest of the class. Before each oral presentation, I would take some time to teach them or review the specific aspects needed for a successful oral presentation. Among the aspects I introduced to them or reminded them of were a well developed introduction (prepare your audience to listen), an organized body using parallel structure in the main points (keyword outline moving from general to specific), and a concise conclusion.

In 1961, I transferred to a large high school in Illinois and while there I wrote a paper advocating "speech in the English classes." I suggested that all the English teachers in that school of five thousand students have an oral presentation component in their class. My suggestion did not meet with great success because many of the English teachers had not had any speech classes before they began teaching and therefore felt ill equipped to prepare students for the presentations and felt even worse about judging those oral presentations. I noted, however, that those teachers who had some speech training in their background were offering the students opportunities to make oral presentations. Nevertheless, the idea of every English instructor including oral presentations in their classes was rejected. In spite of the early rejection of my idea, I've been teaching in English, Theater, and Speech Departments for nearly forty years, and have taught over a dozen different courses. I have required oral presentations in all of these courses. However, just because I enjoy having students share their research and their newly discovered ideas in oral

presentations does not mean that every professor in the college or university system has to enjoy that same activity or even has the time to enjoy student reports.

Hence the question: should communication departments in colleges and universities advocate "speaking across the curriculum?" To answer this question, the advantages of encouraging "speaking across the curriculum" will be examined, followed by its disadvantages, and then I will offer a proposal that might solve the problem.

First, we need to ask what are the advantages of implementing speaking across the curriculum in any college? If our objective in education is to graduate people who can discover information, apply the competencies, and share the knowledge that they have gained while attending the educational institutions, then, of course, we need to teach them the aspects of oral communication and require they apply this in all courses, not just in the communication department classes. It therefore follows that if each course that the students take offers them an opportunity to speak, then the students will obviously be given many opportunities to organize and share ideas from a wide variety of subjects - sometimes perhaps in an impromptu fashion, sometimes in an extemporaneous fashion. They will also have many chances to practice choosing the precise words (using the ladder of abstraction) so that their question or information is accurate. Our students will develop a sense of organization of information which will satisfy their audience - any audience. Their critical thinking skills will be enhanced as they are offered opportunities to interview, to inform, to persuade, to discuss and perhaps even to debate. After all, isn't that what we want - students who can share what they have learned?

So, now that we've decided that speech across the curriculum is a good idea, we need to do a feasibility study, can this really work? Are there classes outside the

communication courses which actually have successful oral presentations? Does the oral presentation of information actually benefit the students?

A news article in the *Speaking Across the Curriculum* newsletter (Weiss 1994 p.1) mentioned that King's College had a capstone senior seminar which includes oral presentation. All the students must take Effective Oral Communication during their first two years; during their senior year, students give formal oral presentations in their capstone course.

At the ten Maricopa Community Colleges, we also offer a Capstone Course (called Integrated Studies) which is a graduation requirement for some students and may only be taken after the students have completed "the General Education Core Courses, [one of which is a communication course] and at least one course from the areas of Writing With Research, Humanities, Physical Well Being, Social and Behavioral Sciences and Natural Sciences" (Glendale Community College Schedule of Classes, Fall 1994 p. 20). This course has a theme that acts as the spine or framework for the course and is taught by a team of instructors. The team comes from the English, Art, Reading, History, and Science departments. The course description indicates that "the course will integrate the content and methods of inquiry studied in the Core and General Distribution requirement and will demonstrate the integrated nature of human experience. Experience and decisions will be evaluated from ethical, aesthetic and intellectual perspectives in the context of the theme, 'Building a Sustainable Society: The Job is Yours'" (Glendale Community College Catalog 1994 p. 117). In that course the culminating student project includes group or collaborative research and an oral and written presentation on a relevant topic. After the student groups or "task forces" have done their research, the task forces develop an outline and prepare visual aids including videos, transparencies, objects, and poster board illustrations which will enhance their oral presentation. Students often show up at their speech

communication professor's door to ask for some help for this presentation. Most of the time they are just seeking affirmation that what they have prepared will be successful.

The Capstone Course in itself is not a unique idea with the Maricopa Community Colleges. Many colleges have been using a 290 (junior college) or 490 (senior college) project for many years. The aspect that sets some of the Capstone Courses apart is the oral presentation. Not all of them include the oral presentation aspect. Nevertheless, I talked to Janet Klann, one of the English professors of Glendale Community College's Integrated Studies Course, who indicated that the students ultimately enjoy and benefit from these oral presentations.

At Glendale Community College we also have an Integrated Honors Block course which is team taught by a speech communication, a history, and an English professor. The course includes a Public Speaking segment, a U. S. History to 1870 segment, and an American Literature Before 1860 segment. The course description indicates that the "students will work together in a learning community. Coordinated assignments provide an opportunity to apply theory and skills from one class to the others in the block" (Glendale Community College Schedule of Classes Fall 1994 p. 19). I asked Holly McKinzie Beene, who is the Speech Communication professor in the block class, how and when the students use the public speaking competencies in the class. Holly indicated that not only does she teach the theory of public speaking but also involves the students in a variety of public speaking activities. Midway through the course, students choose topics from history such as events which have effected significant changes in society, or people who have made significant contributions to our society. The students apply the techniques they've learned in the public speaking segment as they make the oral presentations required for the history segment of the course.

Other colleges have also included block or cluster classes as a requirement for graduation. According to Kristin Marshall, Clarion University offers some cluster courses. Also, Sharon Carrish reports that students at Babson College are required to enroll in a cluster class during their freshman year. For example, a Speech Communication course is clustered with a General Management course. The advantages include the aspect of more interesting topics because common themes are identified such as "demographics in marketing" and "demographics of audiences." The students' speeches develop these themes as well as other management topics (Weiss 1993 p.2).

So, the advantages of "speech across the curriculum" seem to be that students have more occasions to practice skills acquired in a speech or human communication classes, have more chances to discover and share new information, and have more opportunities to enjoy interesting and meaningful topics.

Well, with all these advantages, could there possibly be any disadvantages? Yes, and those disadvantages were not hard to find. I can easily understand the curt and harsh responses of the science professors at Abraham Baldwin College when they were asked if they used any form of student presentations in their classes. Carl Cates writes, " The more detailed responses came from the science faculty, whose responses were written in a curt tone and were harsh in their assessment of the ideas of student presentations in their courses" (Weiss 1994 p.2). Who has the time! In this "information age" we have so much information to give our students in such a relatively short time, that to take time for student presentations in a chemistry class might seem not only very presumptuous, but also very time consuming. (I'll bet those science professors forgot that sharing information with a lab partner is a pretty important form of oral communication. Maybe that's why some labs "blow up.")

Another reason to think twice before requiring all college courses to have some component of oral communication involves the fact that some professors do not have the skills to prepare the students to present the reports since many college professors have never taken a speech class. Some have never had to give oral reports before coming to teach at the college or university. As I stated at the beginning of this paper, after looking at the requirements for teaching degrees in Arizona, ironically, I see that classroom educators do not have to take a single "speech" class in order to receive their degree. Only when they receive an AA degree from one of the community colleges will they have had a speech class.

Another reason not to have an oral presentation in every course might be that many educators, especially in the science and math areas, do not desire to grade oral reports which involve some degree of subjectivity.

Also, another disadvantage of having an oral component in every course could be that material regarding presentations might become redundant for the students. How many times would they need to be told the techniques needed for an effective oral presentation? Also, like many of the English research papers, topics become redundant and opportunities for unethical behavior become more prevalent. (On November 3, 1994, Prime Time discussed the increase of cheating on campuses. Why should we offer more opportunities for students to cheat?)

We need to ask a few other questions such as: once the program is established, how is it monitored, and who monitors it? Another important question asks which department becomes responsible for the cost of the program including both monetary and time costs? Specifically, who pays for the release time that often becomes necessary for faculty to develop the curriculum? In response to those questions, Andrew King comments, "Unless your number one priority is service to others, it will consume all your energies and resources. And the rest of the

university will not be particularly grateful. It will compete with your own major and when resources get tight guess what suffers" (Weiss 1993 p. 2)?

I can cite a specific example of just that problem. At Glendale Community College, Gary Sievers and I decided, rather jokingly, one year that if the English Department could advocate Writing Across the Curriculum, then the Speech Communication Department could advocate "Speaking Across the Curriculum." We both "hung out our shingle" and advertised in the college paper that we would help any students who needed help with a speech from any other class. Quite soon we realized that we had "bitten off more than we could chew" because students did come to us. In no time at all, we were spending more time with our colleagues' students than with our own. It was a grand and glorious idea, but it was very time consuming for both of us. Our shingle is down and we are devoting our time to our students. Next time we will make a feasibility study before venturing in to the unknown. We had no idea of the number of students who would seek our help.

Other colleges have also quit using some form of "speaking across the curriculum." Weiss reports that "Of the eight institutions described in my 1988 study of Start-Up Strategies for Speaking Across the Curriculum, only four of their SAC programs have survived to this time: Hamline University, Alverno College, Central College, and DePauw University" (Weiss 1994 p.2).

Still an even more serious question needs some attention: If every one can teach oral presentations, why should the Introduction to Human Communication courses be taught? Roy Berko says, "Though I feel that speaking across the curriculum advocates feel that they are presenting a positive learning or reinforcement method, it may turn against the field. No matter how many times our literature states that speaking across the curriculum is meant to support and strengthen speaking and listening skills, not replace the academic offerings of speech communication, it just opens the door for the assumption that 'anyone' can teach

oral communication. In addition, it encourages the assumption that reading aloud, doing a group activity, or giving a speech in class, any class, is a substitute for in-depth communication training" (Weiss 1994 p. 2).

Well, what should be done about this conundrum? Should we or should we not advocate "speech across the curriculum"? Would we not accomplish just as much if we would require at least one speech class for graduation? For example, if all students would have to pass an Introduction to Human Communication Course which gives them an opportunity to practice aspects of interpersonal communication, the group process, and public speaking, then all students who have a degree would have had an opportunity to learn how to communicate effectively. At the Maricopa Colleges, students seeking degrees must take at least one communication course. They can choose from four classes which include: Introduction to Human Communication (Com 100), Interpersonal Communication (Com 110), Small Group Communication (Com 230), and Public Speaking (Com 225).

A second idea would call for collaboration between a speech department and another department. The other department would make an assessment of its courses and decide whether or not it is advantageous for the students to give oral presentations in some of the courses. If it seems beneficial and it becomes a requirement that the students give speeches or oral presentations in a particular course, then the speech educators could be asked to help prepare the students for those oral presentations. For example, if the professor who is teaching the course has had no formal preparation in making speeches, then that professor could enlist a colleague from the speech department to prepare the class for speech/report making. The lecture would geared for whatever kind of presentation would be required of the students. If the speech activity for a particular class requires that the students are expected to ask questions in a class, teach them the following aspects of

that activity early in the semester so they can benefit from them for the whole semester:

- How to choose the right wording: suggest that the students use the "jargon" or "vocabulary" of the class so that these special words become second nature to them;
- How to use the ladder of abstraction to help them choose a specific or precise rather than a general word as they ask the question or share the new ideas;
- How to phrase closed, open ended, primary, secondary, follow-up, and probing questions;
- How to develop a sense of organizational patterns by teaching them how to outline their notes and their presentations.

Do students necessarily have to give oral presentations in every class? If we require that students take at least one speech course before they graduate, then we should be able satisfy the oral communication need. For example, if in our Introduction to Human Communication classes, we at least introduce students to theory and application of interpersonal communication, group communication, and public speaking concepts, then they can apply those aspects in all the other classes which require oral communication. We would simply be asking the students to develop and use the concept of "transfer of training." English and reading professors have been doing that for years.

So, is there a specific action the speech educators can take to assure that students have oral communication skills when they receive a degree from college? I propose that communication departments in colleges and universities help other departments make an oral communication needs assessment. According to Scott Johnson, studies show that a definite need exists. He writes,

> . . . an adequate foundation and rationale for adjusting teacher-certification requirements is already present in the literature on communication and education. Individual education programs might make curricular adjustments, and education professionals might encourage changes in certification requirements. Changes might include adding communication components to current education

> courses, incorporating additional communication courses into the curriculum, and requiring assessment of communication skills throughout the student's program including during student teaching. Finally, communication and education departments might cooperate to share resources and expertise, devise courses and course components, and facilitate the development of education students as competent communicators (Johnson p. 15).

We must decide how many communication courses should be required for each degree. This will not be an easy task and will require that we lay careful ground work. We can not make a needs assessment of all the university degrees at one time. However, we need to start somewhere. Perhaps we can take a lesson from the maxim about eating an elephant by taking one bite at a time. I suggest that the first bite or department for which we should make some recommendations is the education department of our colleges and universities.

A November 1994 study reports teacher preparation has been receiving low priority not only from the public, but from people in the educational institutions as well. We need to be a part of the group which will change this situation. We must begin the assessment of oral communication needs now so that we can help the education departments of the college and universities improve teacher preparation. If we can take just that bite for now, we will be well on our way to eating that elephant.

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